



LABORERS'
MAROC

MID-ATLANTIC REGIONAL ORGANIZING COALITION

presents



TOXIC EXPOSURE

MAROC FACT SHEET ON WORKING CONDITIONS FOR DC METRO AREA ASBESTOS WORKERS AND THE DANGERS FACING THE PUBLIC.

Asbestos Fact Sheet

Q: What is asbestos?

A: Asbestos is a mineral and widely used material in the construction industry. It can often be found in insulation, roofing, and tiles. Asbestos is used in a large number of buildings, and a many of these buildings contain friable material, meaning asbestos that crumbles and can become airborne. According to the EPA, asbestos can be found in most of the nation's elementary schools.

Q: What is dangerous about asbestos?

A: While most minerals turn into dust particles when crushed, asbestos breaks up into fine fibers too small to be seen by the naked eye. Asbestos can stay airborne for days. Individual fibers are frequently mixed with a material that binds them together, producing asbestos containing material (ACM). When ACM is damaged or disturbed by repair, remodeling or demolition activities, microscopic fibers become airborne and can be inhaled into the lungs, where they can cause significant health problems. For example, asbestos causes lung cancer, mesothelioma, and asbestosis. It often takes over 20 years for the symptoms of these diseases to appear.

Q: How many people are at risk?

A: The EPA conducted a 1984 survey which found that approximately 66 percent of the buildings that contained asbestos contained damaged ACM. Between 1940 and 1980, an estimated 27 million Americans were exposed to significant amounts of asbestos at work. People may also ingest asbestos if they eat in areas where there are asbestos fibers in the air.

Q: Why is regulating the asbestos industry important? Who is harmed by asbestos?

A: Asbestos does not just affect the workers directly touching the material! In fact, asbestos is a major health risk to your entire family and community – children, pets - everyone!

Q: What are the problems with the industry today?

A: Asbestos contractors in our area have been sued and fined by the EPA, OSHA, and state agencies for egregious violations. They have been found dumping lead paint down drains, improperly ventilating work sites, failing to provide workers with protective masks, and violating the Clean Air Act. Perhaps worst of all, contractors have carried friable material by young schoolchildren, blatantly violating the law and endangering our youth. There have been reports of workers pulling down asbestos from ceilings without the material being wetted down. All of these problems could be alleviated if the industry was properly regulated.



Q: Aren't there already asbestos regulations on the books - why do we need new ones?

A: There are both federal and state regulations on the books, but they are insufficient, and they are not enforced regularly. Environmental and safety violations occur frequently and often go unpunished because there are not enough inspectors. Asbestos contractors have been fined repeatedly for environmental and safety violations, but the fines are far too small to give the contractors a meaningful incentive to change their behavior. Inspections are often not true "surprise" inspections, so contractors are able to get away with egregious violations if the inspectors do not time their visits correctly.

Q: What do other states do to regulate asbestos?

A: New York has some of the strongest laws in the country regulating the industry. Its Department of Labor requires contractors to send notifications ten days in advance of any abatement projects. Failure to do so leads to fines from \$500 to \$5,000. Repeat offenders can have their licenses suspended or revoked. The new law, signed in 2008 after a Republican lawmaker proposed a bill on the subject, has made the asbestos industry far safer and more respectable. Workers earn excellent wages and can make up to \$30 an hour because they are highly skilled. Training programs run by unions and private contractors ensure that workers gain the skills they need to do this important job well. Furthermore, apprenticeship programs can give workers the skills they need to build a career, not just a job.

Q: What can be done to improve the industry?

A: States in our area should follow NY's lead and dramatically increase the fines for contractors who don't play by the rules. Increased fines would self-finance inspection programs, allowing more inspectors to do their jobs. State departments of labor should work with the appropriate labor unions and vocational programs to ensure that workers ensure quality training. Additionally, notification reports should be posted online so that members of the public will know when abatement work is being done in their area.

Sources:

<http://www.epa.gov/region4/air/asbestos/inform.htm>

<http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/pubs/abcsfinal.pdf>

<http://www.health.state.ny.us/environmental/indoors/asbestos/guide.htm>

